Prison Abolition FAQ

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UPDATE: The doc is now closed for questions! Thank you for asking, engaging, and sharing. To create artwork/zines about this information you can, I just ask that you do not remove credit or alter my work’s meaning. Please share with me I love seeing what yall come up with! - K

GLOSSARY: “PIC” = Prison-Industrial Complex

Q: How do we hold people accountable (and by people I mainly mean cops like this not just ~criminals~) in the meantime without relying on the PIC? I have a hard time not falling into the “an eye for an eye” attitude.

A: I don't think there is anything wrong with wanting cops in this situation to suffer. I think it's a reasonable feeling, and a sentiment that I feel often. I think the issue for me is that I organize for the liberation of Black people. Through reading, organizing, and talking to others, I am able to see that any form of giving the PIC legitimacy does not get me closer to my goals of liberation for Black people. This is because (as I'm sure you already know) the "law" as it exists is rooted in anti Blackness. That means that no matter how many cops are charged, the system that allows them to feel empowered to kill us in the first place will not suddenly disappear.

I currently organize with/around criminalized survivors. People (usually women) who are incarcerated for defending themselves from gender-based and sexual violence. Many of these women (who are mostly Black and brown) are incarcerated precisely because of laws that were supposedly put into place to protect them, while their abusers walk free. This isn't a mistake, this is how the US criminal legal system is designed to work.

I think another issue is the conflation between punishment and accountability. There is this idea that:
1. People who go to jail are "bad"
2. Sometimes jail mess up, and “good” people accidentally go there
3. Accountability and punishment are the same things

However, jails/prisons are the places where people actually achieve any form of accountability. In reality, I don't think that most people really want accountability for these police, they want punishment. And some may argue that that is the correct stance, but accountability and punishment are not the same thing.

Accountability (to me) is when someone takes responsibility for their harm, and works to make amends. Accountability takes place within a community, and also acknowledges the dignity of the other person. That's not what happens in prisons in the slightest. Instead, in prisons, people are stripped of their humanity. Societal issues on the "outside" are exacerbated within prison, leading to prisons becoming sites of sexual, racial, and gender-based violence. People are denied access to food, safety, healthcare, and meaningful connection. They are tortured, and then when they are released, they face unimaginable trauma, limited options, and also financial and emotional strain. That is not accountability. That is punishment. And that punishment is not reserved for "bad" people. It is reserved for people who are...
Okay so let's say that there are people out there who genuinely want these cops to face accountability and not punishment. The answer to this is sadly not as cut and dry as people would like to believe. There are numerous ways this can happen outside of the PIC (because we've already established that what takes place in prisons is not accountability). Different instances of harm require different amounts of work, community input etc. Survivors of harm require different things to feel safe and feel like they have experienced accountability. In order for these things to happen, transformative justice would have to occur. You can find out more about that here: and also other resources I'll post below.

www.transformharm.org

Q: So what is the issue with these cops being jailed until we find a way to institute transformative justice in our society?

A: Because this gives the system legitimacy. If these cops are incarcerated, people will continue to believe that the system is "working." People will believe that “bad” people were punished and now society is safer. They will say that we should continue with the system as it is, and continue to ignore the fact that laws continue to and always will disproportionately fall on Black people. They will funnel more money into this system, which will lead to its expansion, and continue the cycle again.

And if the cops aren't incarcerated? Then the system is not working how it "should." We need to fight harder to make sure that killer cops are incarcerated next time. In the meantime, let's continue funneling more Black and brown people into prisons in the hopes that one day, "one" killer cop will be incarcerated.

All of this is happening while the system expands because again, we have normalized prisons as the place where people face accountability, and we have also normalized the mistreatment of people as long as they "deserve" it, without questioning what the root causes of violence are in the first place. It's just too simple of a fix.

I don't want harm treated like that, and centuries have shown us that reforms, etc., don't work. In fact, prison was thought of as a reform, and a more humane alternative to capital punishment. You can read more about prison being a reform in Angela Davis's *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*. You can also view this chart from Critical Resistance I share a lot for more info.

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59ead8f9692ebee25b72f17f/t/5b65cd58758d46d34254f22c/1533398363539/CR_NoCops_reform_vs_abolition_CRside.pdf

Q: How do you propose we punish the police then? They enjoy killing us, and know full well what they are doing, so isn't re-education is a waste of time?

If you see above, it seems like you're equating punishment with accountability. If you want accountability, you can access the resource I posted above and continue to ask questions. If you want to punish these cops, I have no opinion on how to do so or what is “fair” other than the fact that the issue with cops being charged is it gives this system legitimacy, and the impacts of that are felt by Black and brown and poor people. I explain the fallacy of that logic above, but let me know if I can answer more.

EDIT: Also as someone who believes in TJ, I am not interested in coming up with ideas to punish people. This is not what my work revolves around, I just know that punishment has not been shown to actually prevent harm, and that is not where I am spending my time and resources. Sorry to disappoint.

Another thing that I would add, is that if we agree that policing is anti Black, that cops are able to kill people without repercussions, and that this is propped up by the PIC, then the public collectively supporting the PIC only continues the anti Black cycle, which again falls on Black people. We can't have it both ways. Either the PIC is the reason for so much suffering for our people and it needs to be abolished, or the PIC is an "okay" or "good" institution that just gets it wrong sometimes.
Q: How does the prison system currently fail to hold perpetrators of harm accountable? Is there anything else besides holding people accountable that the prison system tends to overlook?

So one thing that the prison system or prison industrial complex or just carceral logic does, is it divides us into two groups. There are people that harm (bad), and there are people that are harmed (good), and these two groups of people are immovable, and you can never fall in more than one category. And also these groups of people just end up this way from birth. There are no systems in place that facilitate these things happening. Anyone can look around and observe human behavior and know that that is false.

In reality, most people have harmed, and most people are harmed. The level of harm varies, but we have all harmed people. By stigmatizing people who have harmed, and disappearing (Angela Davis) them from society, it is easier for us to just pretend that we are "good," and therefore do not have to do the messy and uncomfortable work of being accountable for our harm.

Another thing that people need to realize is that crime is not the same as harm. And what gets defined as crime is not about actually improving people's lives, it's about maintaining the current system we have where there are some lives that are valued, and some that are not. This is why people in our world go to jail for parking tickets, while Wall Street execs also steal money from people and walk free. This is also why people want to see sexual abusers in jail, but also support the military and policing (which have high numbers of sexual abuse/assault). Different laws and rules apply to different people, and that is how crime is defined. That definition is used to maintain social order. So not only is the PIC not invested in accountability, it is invested in punishment. And that punishment is only applied to certain groups of people who are already vulnerable to other systems of oppression like capitalism, racism, anti Blackness, etc.

Q: Hi K. Thank you for posting. I was going to message you today and ask if you had any resource recommendations for someone interested in learning more about prison abolition if you have the time/energy to share.

Resources Below:
What We Mean When We Say Abolish Prisons- Article I wrote for Rewire
● https://rewire.news/article/2020/06/15/what-we-mean-when-we-say-abolish-prisons/
What We Mean When We Say Defund the Police- Article I wrote for Rewire
What We Mean When We Say Abolish the Police- Article I wrote for Rewire
● https://rewire.news/article/2020/06/12/what-we-mean-when-we-say-abolish-the-police/
Dream Defenders SunDDay School with me, Derecka Purnell, Cherell Brown, Phillip Agnew, Delaney Vandergrift, and Dr. Angela Davis
● https://twitter.com/sheabutterfemme/status/1272256721491234816?s=20
On the Road to Abolition with me, Dean Spade, Kamau Walton, Mariame Kaba, and Woods Ervin
● https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHdq4dqBMyk
● Graphic by @lizar_tristry (expand outside of this doc)
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My Interview with Yales working group on Racial Capitalism and the Carceral State
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eYgFkXLXps

Interview between Samah and Maya
- https://ccrjustice.org/activist-files?
utm_source=instagram&utm_medium=instagram_Oct26&utm_campaign=Activist%20Files

8toabolition.com Resources
- Millennials are Killing Capitalism Interview
  - https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cDovL21pbGxlbm5pYWxzYXJaI2lsbGluZ2NhcgIIYXVpc20ubGlic3luLmNvbS9yc3M/episode/NDNmY2YyYmUtZTE5ZC00MmU0LTllOGEtZDNhNzgwODVhMG4?
  - Wear Your Voice Article

My Interview for Death Panel Podcast - starts at 1:22

Database for Police Abolition
- https://www.d4pa.org/faqs

Abolition Podcast Playlist Compiled by Rebel Steps
- https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3ei5D7CV40lPq0IB5AvyHg

Article on Transformative Justice by Laura Rene Chow

Mariame Kaba on Abolition in the NYT

A Helpful Guide to Abolition by Micah Herskind- Features tons of resources
- https://medium.com/@micahherskind/resource-guide-prisons-policing-and-punishment-effb5e0f6620

Prison Abolition Reading List- Havent read through all myself
- https://www.google.com/url?q=https://docs.google.com/document/d/11E1kWvMO0GAwClzc1ZyNryazJHGhPZvkvGnL7-
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My Goodreads Prison Abolition Reading List
- https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/36195501-k?shelf=prison-abolition&fbclid=IwAR1FULdChLVMGQ_9elKynNNAAHxHFNL2Wul78y1VHRnPlgmxJFIQPaLKVls

My Goodreads TJ/Accountability Reading List
- https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/36195501-k?shelf=tj-ri-accountability&fbclid=IwAR3SdUOpJkuc744rzmYoIsxS1KZs8GjpfXtel2qOUL8hsadjLKvThSSkCW
- https://www.nonewjails.nyc/no-new-jails-close-rikers-now-we-keep-us-safe-guide?fbclid=IwAR3gXe-T-LA_PQVKAkle-Co3_0i8erEYWqsGxlIk0y3RQkfr36alj5_6hb_g
- These are all just starting points but a TLDR way to learn more is to
  1. Read Are Prisons Obsolete? by Angela Davis (relatively short, super amazing).
  2. Consume any and all content by Mariame Kaba (❤️)
  3. Find a political home and/or reading group that is committed or dedicated to abolition.
  From there the knowledge will come naturally.

Q: I have a quick question for you. As talk of defunding the police becomes more mainstream, do you find more hope in that or do you have any cynicism? I'm asking bc under a post someone shared in reference to defunding the police, someone in the comments mentioned what if the govt then increases military presence instead. Is that a concern within the movement? Or would you say that's more along the lines of conspiratorial/lack of imagination for what could actually come about?

A: I would say that my overall issue with defunding the police and also schools and other institutions ending their relationships with the police is that while its a good first step, it doesn't do much to reimagine how we view "safety" because of this, schools could say we are ending our relationship with the police, but bring in security guards from private companies and that would be viewed as acceptable. I wouldn't say that fear about the military presence increasing is an overall concern. The main concern is people not understanding what abolition is, and why we need to abolish the entire PIC which includes cops, the military, etc. So basically TLDR: I think we should defund the police, but I think we need to be grounded in what we're doing it, and realize that individual cops are just one small part of an entire massive structure, the PIC.

Q: How do you respond to people who ask how victims of sexual assault and domestic violence will get justice under abolition? “Those victims never get justice under our current system” apparently isn’t a sufficient answer.

A: I would point them to the work that my political home Survived and Punished does. Our comrades on the inside are people who are incarcerated for defending themselves from sexual and gender based violence. If the law was meant to protect victims, then why would so many survivors (the majority of people in women's prisons) be survivors themselves? Sexual assault and domestic violence groups weren’t always as intimately connected with the PIC, but there was a spike in that connection after the dawn of neoliberalism. You can read more about this in a book called In An Abusive State by Kristin Bumiller. In reality, most people do not have “successful” court trials when they come forward about abuse. Instead they are opened up to more harm. In order to stop sexual assault and domestic violence along with any social issue, we need to get radical. We need to grasp at the root and work to end sexism, the patriarchy, classism, ableism, etc, and all systems that create harm. The PIC does none of that, instead it just perpetuates it. Look more into the work of people in the transformative justice movement, and check out the book Beyond Survival and the Zine What About the Rapists. Incite! Also has some good insight on this as well, and you may want to read The Revolution Starts at Home.
Q: This isn’t abolition-related specifically, but could you share resources about looting/rioting/political violence/destruction of property as valid responses to this moment? I’m black, and I’ve been having a lot of difficulty in conversations with family/friends who support “peaceful protests” but are resistant to understanding the use of violence among protestors (particularly when it comes to the looting of small businesses owned by black folks in my neighborhood). I’ve tried talking about how looted wealth, looted bodies, and looted land are foundational to this country, but the response I usually get is some version of “That doesn’t make it okay in this case.” I would appreciate any suggestions you have about engaging in dialogues like this!

A: Sorry that you’re dealing with this. I think that it’s difficult to have these conversations with people who may not have a structural (or anti-capitalist) analysis of what is going on. I think I would go back to the violence of capitalism, and also question why things are classified as violence. There is more theft from people through the form of wage theft and overtime violations than there is during random instances of looting, and not only that, these large chains are heavily insured. So they’re not really losing money to begin with. When it goes to small businesses, in a marxist framework, small business owners aren’t suddenly immune from being bosses if they have workers employed for them. I think people need to grapple with the discomfort of knowing that Black people are often asked to behave in these really respectable ways to assert our humanity, while others are not. I’m still going to chew on this question because it seems like you’ve made a lot of the arguments I would have made. For now, I would recommend reading the essay Against Innocence by Jackie Wang if you haven’t, and also Rules for Radicals by Saul Alinsky. Just the section on peaceful protests/strategy, I believe it’s the second or third chapter.

EDIT: This essay may be of interest to anyone pondering this question https://thenewinquiry.com/in-defense-of-looting/

Q: When discussing prison abolition with friends/family many of them always bring up rapists, serial killers, violent cases, etc. They believe that much harm will happen if prisons are abolished. Dr. Angela Davis believes we should focus on the issues that lead them into prison(root o. What exact things can we do to ensure accountability with violent individuals such as rouge cops, serial killers, and rapists? The subject of prison labor also comes up a lot with the discussion of prison aboliton and some argue that it's good for prisoners while many believe it's another form of slavery. What can we do instead of prison labor to build character/ensure accountability?

1. I answered most of this above (to the best of my ability), but yes I agree with Dr. Davis, we should focus on the issues that lead people into prisons. Why do people desire to be cops? Why is our society built on sexual violence? And why are there serial killers (who often target the most marginalized communities because they know they are not valued in our society)? Like Davis says, the PIC stops us from answering/even asking any of these questions before locking people up.

Also like I said above, why are some people considered serial killers, but then other people who kill people in the military, predatory housing/lending practices, gentrification etc not determined to be serial killers. Abolitionists are not saying that without the PIC harm will not happen. We believe harm to be inevitable. However, without the PIC taking all of our money, time, resources, and energy, we *all* will be able to come up with more sustainable and humane ideas to keep people safe, and to prevent as much harm as possible, AND to not replicate harm. In fact, that’s another issue with the PIC. It not only stops harm, it replicates this harm. So we don’t claim to have all of the answers. We just name the fact that the PIC stops us from even being able to formulate important questions.

2. Prison labor is a modern form of slavery, along with prison in general. It does not build any form of character and is just one example (of many) of how the carceral state interlocks with capitalism to produce products and make money, with no legal ramifications for paying workers pennies an hour. Instead of prison labor, people need to not be in prison. But also, prison labor isn't the only way that prisons make money off of human suffering. Check out this podcast episode from Justice in America on privatization.

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Q: Can one not be for the abolition of policing, and ask for the prosecution of killer cops?

The former will take time and a collective effort, as we know. So what would be the other option when it comes to helping the families of victims feel some sort of relief, in the now? If those cops aren't prosecuted, wouldn't we be robbing our Black communities of a deserved feeling of progress, even if we know that it's not the end-all, be-all?

A: Abolitionists are working to destroy all facets of the PIC. We also support things that work to reduce the size and power of the PIC. So no, you can't be an abolitionist and call for prosecution of anyone. Those are two things working in direct opposition to each other. Also, prosecutors ARE cops. We can't just support the PIC because it makes *SOME* (and certainly not all) Black people feel better at night, if doing so isn't resulting in anything other than more material harm for Black people. Organizing strategy is not simply rooted in people's feelings while ignoring the reality of what is actually happening.

QUESTIONS I'M STILL ANSWERING

Q: Many of those I am in community work in social work and human services broadly. Being exposed to sexual violence and child abuse, it is very hard, even when citing to movement ancestors, to have these conversations. The reply I usually hear is “what about the people who just can't be rehabilitated?” Do you have advice on how to hold your own in these dialogues? (Not sure if this belongs in social work doc!)

Q: (this is similar to an above question) a real conflict I've grappled with about abolition is those who are unwilling to be held accountable. Correct me if I'm wrong but accountability requires you to be willing to be accountable. Let's say the abolitionists (hopefully) succeed in crumbling these systems. What happens in the immediate aftermath when there are cops, white supremacists, abusers etc. who are not willing to be accountable? A lot of these people are willing to hurt us and have the training/ resources to do so. How do we bring back those unwilling to change.

Q: How/Why do you feel that judge discretion has failed in changing the outcome of the PIC so that it does not seem to be a dichotomy between those who do good and those who do bad?(I accept that dichotomy is bad)

Q: what happens to murderers and rapists that are unable to rehabilitate? i understand that this question somewhat applies under the assumption that our current system is tackling the issue of murderers and rapists properly (which it obviously isn't, considering that many of these ppl are walking free) but if we're looking at this abolitionist alternative independently, not comparing it to our current system, how will these people be dealt with? I understand that abolitionists want to tackle the root of the problem so that these crimes will be less likely to exist in the first place, but if certain ppl fall through the cracks n commit said crimes, and don't necessarily respond positively towards methods of restorative and transformative justice, what happens to them?
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Firstly, thank you so much for taking the time to do this. I am all for the abolition of police and I have seen actual alternatives to policing that are very possible. Prison abolition texts however seem to revolve around how we must not legitimize the PIC and that is mostly because Prison does not at all address rehabilitation or even true justice for victims. Understanding this, I hoped that seasoned prison abolitionist would be able to point to actual alternatives, however even as I listened to Dr. Angela Davis speak she kept saying “I’m sure we can come up with something more imaginative than just prison” what I cannot seem to find anywhere however is an example of what some of these imaginative alternatives could be. Pedophiles come to mind as a group of people who do not need to have unlimited interaction with society, would the answer perhaps be treatment centers or special places for those types of people to live?